DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 084 CS 214 282

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TITLE Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 1994--Six Summaries. Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English.
INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 12p.; For the 1992 report, see ED 344 218; for the 1993 report, see CS 214 281.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Arts; Literature Appreciation; *Mass Media Role; *Reading Instruction; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; Multicultural Materials; National Council of Teachers of English

ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 11th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King); (2) Commission on Language (Vivian I. Davis); (3) Commission on Composition (Marilyn M. Cooper); (4) Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin); (5) Commission on Media (Carole Cox); and (6) Commission on Reading (Patrick Shannon). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: the positive trends of teachers using information gained from research and teachers becoming more extensively involved in curriculum development; the integration of all language modes; the effort to establish comprehensive standards in English language arts for which a variety of authentic assessments can be developed; the chilling effect on curricular choices caused by increasingly effective lobbying to privatize education; equity issues; the need for redefining assessment in writing; issues of access, pedagogy, and resources involved with the use of computer and media technology in the writing classroom; the trend toward including writing in the study of literature and literature in the study of writing; the derivation of new interpretive strategies from technologies such as hypermedia, CD ROM, and multimedia; censorship; national trends in media literacy; the need for expanded networking among arts organizations; interdisciplinary approach to media education; and the primary trend in reading education towards national content standards. (RS)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1994–SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English.

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the 11th annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

The Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King , Director) recognizes continuing *positive trends such as teachers using information gained from research, including research from their own classrooms and others'; teachers becoming more extensively involved in curriculum development; more segments of the public becoming involved in the curriculum process; the implementation of curriculum and methodologies that accommodate pluralism; and the application of curriculum that considers different learning styles. Unfortunate trends of reliance on standardized assessment and instruction (e.g., testing and software packages) continue.*

The Commission *believes that language is political.* Using language empowers the user. The very acts of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are powerful, enabling tools. The commission recognizes that *providing opportunities for such empowerment is in itself a political activity and that the politics of curriculum, therefore, should be raised to a more conscious level.* The English curriculum is very often a means for developing personal and social rights and responsibilities as well as enabling economic mobility. The commission therefore believes that *all groups and individuals must be given as complete access to the curriculum as possible in order that they may take their rightful place in a pluralistic and democratic society.* In addition, by delivering the curriculum in a variety of modes and by honoring diverse learning styles, teachers allow all students to achieve excellence and to take their place as thoughtful, literate citizens. The curriculum should enfranchise the entire population and thus give all people powerful collective and individual voices. To give the learner access to the language is to give the learners power. A broad-based, multi-voiced curriculum liberates the learner. Such a curriculum helps to develop tolerant, respectful, and enquiring citizens who celebrate their own rights and responsibilities and who also value and respect the rights and responsibilities of others.

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The Commission *supports the censorship stands taken by NCTE and SLATE.* Subtle forms of censorship such as publishers' restraints on professional writing control the information and range of examples available to the public and the profession.

The Commission *supports use of quality literary texts that reflect cultural and gender diversity at all grade levels.* Literature instruction centers on personal and aesthetic

responses rather than answering factual questions or teaching isolated skills. Through multicultural literature, students' viewpoints are expanded and they learn to value and celebrate diversity. Both teachers and students make literature selections from a wide range of genres, historical periods, authors, and points of view.

The Commission *urges the modification of the instructional program to meet the needs of students who speak languages other than English.* With ever increasing numbers of students who speak languages other than English, curriculum must change in response to this reality. *Assuring that these students learn English is a priority as is respecting their own language and culture.* Teachers need to know the principles of other language acquisition and their pedagogical implications to ensure all students' access to language and learning. Teachers must also be aware of cultural differences that affect interaction in the classroom and students' responses of assignments. *School districts, colleges, and universities must provide the support needed for teachers to effect these curricular changes.*

The Commission *applauds the integration of all language modes*--talking, listening, reading, and writing--in the classroom. Learners use language in all its modes to construct knowledge and to present and inform. As the conceptualization of curriculum changes from knowledge transmission to knowledge creation through inquiry, active and energetic language use becomes central to classroom activities. Talk in classrooms changes from lecture to conversation; writing becomes a mode of learning as well as a mode of expression; listening and reading are both understood as active processes of making meaning. Language is now viewed as both process and product. Through varied language experiences, students gain fluency in language functions.

The Commission *supports the use of computer technology for telecommunications, information retrieval, and sound interactive multimedia instruction.* At the same time, the Commission *deplores the proliferation of "electronic workbook" computer software and any technologies geared toward standardization of learning.* The Commission is *concerned about inappropriate uses of satellite connections,* e.g. enabling large classes with a single teacher. The use of technology, especially computers, raises important questions for researchers, national educational organizations, and teacher training institutions: Which new technological devices are best for the classroom? How do teachers avoid misuse of technology? Staff development will help teachers answer these questions.

The Commission *applauds the increasing trend in the development of interdisciplinary curricula.* Viewing knowledge as a total rather than a fragmented experiences enables students to discover connections they might not have otherwise made. The perspective from various vantage points for both students and teachers develops the consciousness of the contributions all disciplines make to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, enhances cross-cultural understanding, and promotes better self-awareness as world citizens. To be

successful, interdisciplinary study requires the support of school administration to provide resources and time to develop such courses. The Commission acknowledges that the success of interdisciplinary teaching and learning depends on the commitment of those teachers involved.

The Commission *supports the NCTE/IRA efforts to establish comprehensive standards in English language arts for which a variety of authentic assessments can be developed by teachers, schools, school districts and states.* Authentic assessments derived from the emerging NCTE/IRA standards will offer valid information about what students know and are able to do because the assessments will be products or demonstrations of real reading, writing and speaking. Authentic assessment is ongoing and is an integral component of the curriculum. Authentic assessment is learner-referenced rather than criterion-referenced. Examples of authentic assessment are directed writing samples, audio and video tapes, reading samples, discussions, readers' theater, interviews and formal oral presentations. Portfolios must include a representation of the learners' works and must include samples selected by the teacher, by the student and those selected collaboratively. These portfolios, collected over time, including reflections, written about the substance, value and reasons for inclusion of the artifact provide real in-depth insights into individual accomplishments. Teacher observation of students in the process of learning must be valued and must be considered in conjunction with the product of that learning; learners' observation of their learning must also be considered. Support must be given to teachers and administrators as they learn about and design these new ways of assessment. Teachers must be supported as they move from traditional methods of assessment. This support can come in the form of inservice training for all educators and meetings for parents and community members so that all become informed of research and best practice in the area of assessment.

The Commission *endorses the notion of curriculum and staff development as ongoing and continuous and applauds teachers who take increasing responsibility for their own professional growth. Schools must provide time and resources* to support these efforts. Preliminary drafts of the Standards Project for English Language Arts, which emphasize process instruction and collaborative learning, place needed pressure on teacher education an staff development to emphasize strategies that encourage learners to risk, discover, experiment, negotiate, seek clarification, and critique in classrooms of diverse populations. Teacher education and inservice leaders need to help teachers develop and revise individual philosophies to support their curricular choices.

The Commission *strongly recommends designing ways to form collaborative relationships between parents and teachers.* As curriculum and schools move toward the 21st century, mutual understanding and respect between parents and teachers becomes imperative. Teachers should provide parents with frameworks for understanding their classrooms by sharing actual examples of their children's work. At the same time, teachers must be open

to understanding parents and their hopes for their children. Schools and teachers must reach out to parents and invite them to become partners in their children's education.

The Commission *supports the effort to establish comprehensive standards in English Language Arts for which a variety of authentic assessments can be developed.* Authentic assessments offer valid information about what students know and are able to do; they are products or demonstrations of language in all its modes. Authentic assessment is ongoing and an integral component of the curriculum. It is learner referenced rather than criterion referenced. Examples of authentic assessment which can be collected in a portfolio include teacher anecdotal observations, writing samples, and audio and video tapes of reading, discussions, readers' theatre, interviews and formal, oral presentations. Portfolios can include samples selected by the teacher, by the student, and collaboratively using agreed upon criteria. These portfolios collected over time include reflections on the selections and the reasons for their inclusion. Both teacher and learner self evaluation must be valued and considered during assessment. Teachers and administrators need support and training as they learn about and implement authentic assessment.

The **Commission on Language** (Vivian I. Davis, Director) is *concerned about the chilling effect* on curricular choices and best practice in language arts research and instructions *caused by increasing effective lobbying of the partnership of certain business interests and political groups* who intend to privatize education, to impede diversity and prevent uncensored investigation of ideas, cultures and world-views that they do not share.

The Commission *stresses that the study of grammar, at all levels, be based on the understanding that the meaning and function of grammar are grounded in language-not the other way around.* The discrete teaching of grammar, as prerequisite to or as a vehicle for improving competency in oral and/or written language arts, therefore, cannot be condoned as good practice.

The Commission cites *a number of equity issues that must be recognized and confronted* as the tensions underlying diversity. Without prioritization, those issues include the effects on student voice, oral and written, by the limits of "Standard" and/or formal English; the inhibitive nature of academic discourse and writing; lack of knowledge and validation of global Englishes; lack of knowledge and/or acceptance of dialects; text representations of language and models; the question of who influences and/or teaches language awareness curricula; the direction and uses of language research; and the role of "outside experts" on language arts research and instruction.

Too often *language arts instruction in four year colleges and graduate programs depends on the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of individual professors, not on what practitioners need to know to help students* achieve and develop competency in communications. Also, *although an increasing number of potential language arts teachers begin their studies at two year colleges, virtually no attention is given to the language arts knowledge base required of professors who teach in those colleges.* Consequently, the Commission emphasizes the need for urgent and immediate focus on increasing and improving the required language study component of education for language arts practitioners at all levels, particularly, higher education.

The **Commission on Composition** (Marilyn M. Cooper, Director) believes that *assessment in writing needs to be redefined,* so that the focus in assessment is on instruction and on communication. Assessment should be seen primarily as self-assessment, a means of helping students--and teachers--learn from their work, and as communication with students, parents, administrators, and the public. The purpose of assessment should not be for norming students, nor for justifying the existence of schools, nor for simply demonstrating how many skills students have acquired. For this reason, the Commission sponsored the resolution on grading that was passed by NCTE, calling for NCTE to encourage all teachers of writing to eschew giving grades on student essays in favor of narrative evaluations, written comments, conferences with students, and other forms of individual feedback. The resolution called for establishment of a committee to investigate alternatives to giving students grades in writing courses--alternatives that evaluate progress in ways that are sensitive to needs of local districts and individual colleges and universities; alternatives that not only emphasize writing as an ability that is diverse in its expression and related to the goals and cultures of our diverse population but also legitimize writing as an important ability in our society.

Parents and administrators do have a right to know what students are learning and that they are learning, but the separation of classrooms from parents and administrators has led to too great a reliance on external measures of quantifiable skills. *Assessment thus should be seen as an attempt to communicate with parents, administrators, and the public.* Rather than providing grades, statistics, and scores, teachers should work to involve parents, administrators, and the public in the activities of their classrooms, so that control is shared, not taken away. By inviting them into classrooms or otherwise showing them what is going on here, teachers can forge bonds and allay fears of new methods, threats to religious values, and indoctrination.

Such invitations have to be innovative enough so that all kinds of people are included, which means not assuming that all people are free to come to school, that all are speakers of English, that all have the confidence to talk with teachers, and that all will be properly respectful.

The Commission *applauds the involvement of NCTE in the national standards project* and its collaboration with the International Reading Association. Because the standards, as they are being developed, are broad and general (not skill-based) and adaptable to local situations, we believe they will have a positive effect on the teaching of writing. Through the use of vignettes drawn from real classrooms, the standards depict what is really happening in schools and demonstrate the kind of writing education teachers want for all students across the country. We do believe, however, that all discussions of national standards in education must be accompanied by discussions about the inequities of funding of education. Standards will do little to improve education unless the resources (including libraries, adequate textbooks, technology, and teachers) necessary to providing good writing instruction are equally available to all schools and all students.

The Commission continues to be *concerned about issues of access, pedagogy, and resources involved with the use of computer and media technology in the writing classroom, while still being interested in the pedagogical promise of such technology.* While computers can increase students' interest in and exposure to writing--especially when cheap portable computers are sent home with secondary students or supplied to college students--technology is, in general, not equally accessible to all students in all schools. It also tends to overshadow and supplant activities designed to focus on inquiry, critical thinking, and analysis, which are essential to writing instruction; and it often takes up funds and space desperately needed for books and teachers. With multimedia packages and CD-ROM and hypertext resources for research writing, new problems arise: ethical problems of created representations that blur the distinction between fact and reconstruction and problems of censorship and control when students use prepackaged and thus limited sources for their writing. *Teachers must receive more training in how to deal with technology,* so that they are aware of its limitations as well as its possibilities. They must *investigate the ethical and political issues involved in its use* as well as the logistics, so that they can use technology in support of their pedagogical goals.

The Commission views with alarm the *trend to reduce instruction in English in secondary schools to one semester.* Programs known variously as concentrated curriculum, block scheduling, or flex scheduling may sometimes be good in theory (in that they enable collaboration, longer-term focus, and more use of process pedagogy), but they are too often perverted to compress and weaken instruction in writing. Reading and writing are abilities that need constant development and practice, rather than being restricted to only part of the school year.

The Commission also *encourages new efforts to teach handwriting,* for illegible writing creates problems ranging from deaths from wrongly filled prescriptions for medicine to misdelivered mail. The Commission *continues to oppose corporate schools and the voucher system* because they further increase inequities in access to good education for all students.

And, finally, the Commission *urges that more attention be paid to public literacy in writing classes at all levels.* Writing is a major form of inquiry and a way of acting on and in the world, and the design of writing instruction should reflect and support this essential role for writing in our society.

The Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin, Director) endorses the following general statement concerning the study and teaching of literature: The Commission supports teaching and learning about literature which encourages *reading and writing of and about literature as part of a literate life for all students and teachers; teacher/student, as well as student/student dialogue; collective-meaning construction and acceptance of multiple interpretations; reading of real texts (real books, real films, real lyrics, etc); inclusive selection of texts; teachers and students taking critical stances; teacher and student collaboration on issues of curriculum, text selection, and evaluation.*

The Commission makes the specific statements below as they relate to the reading and teaching of literature:

The Commission emphasizes that *multiculturalism is a positive concept, emphasizing respect for diverse cultures and their use of language,* including the well-known and the little-known, the traditional and the unusual. We urge teachers and students as readers to read on several levels, including the reading of any text directly for information, understanding and pleasure; the application of contextual information outside the text, including other texts, which may aid in understanding; and the crediting of personal experience outside the text as a valid source of understanding that text.

The Commission *affirms the trend toward including writing in the study of literature and literature in the study of writing.* We urge teachers to combine the study of literature with the instruction of writing, emphasizing the cyclical and collaborative nature of the reading-writing process. The Commission *continues to embrace the practice of writing in response to literature.* We recommend that student portfolios include forms of writing such as "free-writes," collaborative writing activities, double and triple entry journals, personal essays, and critical essays that respond to literature. The Commission believes that ultimately we experience ourselves and others more fully through the reading-writing process.

The Commission *urges the use of descriptive, narrative, and argumentative evaluation of student performance and of language arts programs.* The Commission strongly *disapproves of the continuing trend toward imposing inappropriate quantitative evaluations.* Students should be able to show interpretive qualities in a variety of ways including oral response, dramatization, group construction of meaning through collaborative learning, and responses through various critical "windows;" the Commission deplores single interpretations of literary works.

The Commission *encourages deriving new interpretive strategies from technologies* such as Hypertext, CD ROM, Multimedia, and other late 20th-century innovations. The Commission further recommends that teachers be involved in the process of making new technological texts; teachers address the dangers of the divisive nature of the expense of technology; teachers be vigilant against advances in technology that push low- to middle-income students further from access to a viable education; teachers consider the effects of "typifying" literature via computers; technology not be emphasized at the expense of the book.

The Commission on Literature *supports teaching and learning about literature which expands empowerment* by encouraging collective-meaning construction and acceptance of multiple interpretations; teacher and student collaboration on issues of curriculum, text selection, and evaluation; empowerment and motivation of students to teach themselves; embodiment of the expected powers of the teachers into various students; empowering students to build a personal canon to understand the idea of canonicity; the trusting of students to "make sense" of texts.

New trends and issues identified by the commission focus on *language adaptation, censorship, free reading, curriculum revision, and collaborative writing.*

The Commission recognizes the fact that there are many first-time school-bound students who do not speak English. We urge the *encouragement and support of teachers who work to increase the number of languages they are allowed to include in classroom instruction.*

The Commission deplores censorship of literary texts but *urges teachers of literature to respond with seriousness, tact, and flexibility to the diverse values and experiences that often provoke calls for censorship.*

The Commission on Literature supports teaching and learning about literature which encourages reading and writing of and about literature as part of a literate life for all students and teachers. We *advocate the encouragement of the "free reading" concept as it applies to students becoming more adept and diverse at reading many kinds of literature.* Students should be given more choices as to what they should read; they should decide what is appropriate reading to increase their reading comprehension.

The Commission *urges teachers to secure adequate resources for delivering a multicultural literature classroom.* The Commission is especially concerned with institutional commitments to fund teaching development, text selection, and acquisition of other resources necessary to create an inclusive classroom environment. Also, literature should be defined beyond traditional genres; literature also includes nontraditional texts and can be a study of interdisciplinary discourse.

If many K-12 teachers look toward university literature teachers to make innovations that they will follow, then the university literature professors must question their own classroom structures as they serve as models for teachers who teach developing students. Further, the fact that a particular teacher is philosophically/pedagogically opposed to another teacher does mean that either of the teachers is a poor teacher.

The Commission *encourages the forming of collaborative writing groups* (3-5 students) that will construct analytical questions and analytical topics for their own consideration. We strongly endorse the trend of teaching people to write better together.

The **Commission on Media** (Carole Cox, Director) noted trends and issues in the areas of *national standards, teacher preparation, networking, interdisciplinary education, expanded concepts of media literacy, equity and access, and multiculturalism.*

National standards projects in the English language arts may fail to include media literacy at all, or in ways commensurate with current practice, unless media specialists make contact with those preparing standards. We need a representative with media knowledge at the standards discussions. We need to be sure media curriculum is appropriately defined. Furthermore, as performance standards develop, how can we insure that media literacy will be included at local, state, and national levels?

We have made strides in teacher education with a proposed *NCTE book Media Literacy* in progress, and the upcoming Conference on Media Education, July 22-24, 1994 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. We need to continue to make inroads with Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts, and *find new ways to encourage school systems to provide in-service training.* As with teaching about computers, teachers often feel inadequate teaching media, and do not have the time or resources to teach themselves.

If we want to lobby for more media education, we might benefit from *expanded networking with other arts organizations.* Additionally, with media of increasing importance on the political scene, what responsibilities for media literacy are a part of the social studies curriculum and what responsibilities are a part of the English curriculum? As the national standards develop, how can the two groups work together on standards for media literacy?

Interdisciplinary education. Schools from the primary level upwards are stressing *an interdisciplinary approach which provides an ideal opportunity for students to study television, film, advertising, magazines, and other artifacts of popular culture,* in conjunction with history. Media and popular culture should be a critical part of interdisciplinary studies.

Through projects such as a Commission-sponsored NCTE book, conferences, and participation in standards projects, we hope to *articulate an expanded concept of media literacy, grounded in ideas such as media as culture.*

On one hand, media's use could ensure access and equity to ideas and information, i.e. discussion of common cultural icons or the use of audio/video tapes for entre into literature for all students. On the other hand, we should be *concerned about equity when we advocate national standards that can involve expensive technology* such as computers or video equipment. The issue of cost needs to be addressed.

The **Commission on Reading** (Patrick Shannon, Director) reports that this year as last, *the primary trend in reading education remains national content standards.* The Commission on Reading wishes that this were not true. We would rather that the trend was toward local, regional, and international collectives in which we could engage the theoretical and practical issues of reading education--issues which include the cultural, economic, and political basis of our and students' reading. Instead of this, some of us sit and fret over how to word content standards which will define how all teachers should read, teach, and equip themselves. Others stew over how to stop that wording, and still others wait for the word.

For at least the length of my tenure on the Commission, we have cautioned the NCTE and others about the Federal Government's intervention in "the standards process" and worried over their intention through the last three administrations. The NCTE has been careful to make distinctions between federal standards, those controlled by the government, and national standards, those forged from a consensus among the profession. They were in favor of the latter and ambivalent about the former. Now that the Government has withdrawn their financial support from the IRA, NCTE, and Center for the Study of Reading Joint Standards Project in English Language Arts, *we hope that the membership and other educators will reconsider the wisdom and likely outcomes of "the standards process."*

Despite the intentions of producing a document that will, in Miles Myers' phrase, "launch a new kind of civil rights movement" and despite a year's work of the English educators involved in the Joint Project, a spokeswoman for the Federal Department of Education reported that their funding would stop for the project because, "we find that there has not been substantial progress toward meeting the objectives in *any* of the approved applications, and there is serious doubt that the [Joint Project] will be able to achieve the stated goals within the given time." The Department will mount a new competition to become the authors of content standards in English. What should we make of this event?

(1) The Federal Government has a content agenda for these standards. If this were not true, then how could the funding be pulled for lack of progress when the Joint Projects have produced reams of statements, vignettes, and

accomplishments in their selected rubric for standards writing? If history is any indication of what the Government wants, then we should expect Federal standards for reading education that will have something to do with explicit teaching of decoding skills by a certain grade level and testable outcomes on reading textbooks in the disciplines. Those were the prominent features of the last two Federal Government requests for proposals for the National Reading Research Center. Standards and assessments of this kind apparently can be available in "the given time."

(2) The Federal standards will prevent national standards from having any impact. This is a lesson in power. With separate sets of federal and national standards for reading education--the former with ties to money and the latter from an organization which couldn't produce acceptable federal standards--which one do you think will stand up in court?

(3) The issue for the coming year, then, is we have been had.